

From long lines to telephone lines



The stock market crash of October 1929 and ensuing economic and political turmoil of the Great Depression led, in 1935, to Congress passing the Social Security Act. This act included the advent of the unemployment insurance program to provide benefits to eligible workers who are unemployed through no fault of their own.

It may come as a surprise for Washington state residents today who look for jobs over the Internet or file for unemployment benefits by telephone that those services are rooted in several key 20th-century historical events. These include the turn-of-the century wave of immigrants, the Great Depression of the 1930s and at least one world war.

Unemployment benefits were first issued in Washington state in 1939. Cash was in short supply and unemployed workers lined up for cash payments to help them support themselves while they looked for work. Benefits provided modest financial stability to buy food and meet mortgage or rent payments. It also helped communities maintain consumer spending and jobs as the economy struggled to rebound. The maximum weekly payment was about \$15, with an average of just under \$12. The average wage for all workers in the state was about \$27 per week at that time.

While the concept of unemployment insurance remains the same today, unemployed workers no longer wait in line for cash. Instead, they file claims over the phone or on the Internet and receive weekly checks in the mail. During 2005,



182,470 initial applications were made by telephone and more than 96,661 applications were filed online. The maximum weekly payment was \$496, with an average of just under \$297. The average wage for all workers was about \$776 per week.

More employment services join the department

The federal government established a network of placement offices in 1907 to help immigrants find jobs. Staff became federal employees under the War Manpower Commission in 1942.

Four years later, the employment service was returned to the states and, with it, a cooperative agreement between the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Washington Employment Security Department to prepare and publish current employment figures.

In response to the post-World War II slump in the economy and the need to help a flood of returning veterans, unemployment insurance staffing increased to include veterans employment representatives, employment counselors and staff trained to provide services to people with disabilities.

The shift toward partnerships and workforce development

By the end of the 1960s, the department was administering programs under the Manpower Development and Training Act, the Civil Rights Act and several others



that later were consolidated under the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act.

Special programs for unemployed workers who were not eligible for regular benefits were established. These included extended unemployment compensation, Trade Readjustment Assistance and Disaster Unemployment Assistance.

In the 1970s, the Job-Service Employer Committees recognized employers as customers and acknowledged that the ability to serve workers is directly related to meeting employer needs.

The importance of business as a customer was emphasized in the early 1980s in the federal Job Training Partnership Act, which required business participation in advisory committees. Since the establishment of WorkSource in 1999, the business focus has been raised to an even higher level.

WorkSource is a partnership of business, government agencies, colleges and non-profits. It has become the cornerstone for improving access to employment and training services via career one-stop centers in the state. This approach, coupled with technology-based self-service, makes it possible to serve a greater number of people than ever. Some 214,320 people found jobs through WorkSource in 2005.

Although the department's responsibilities and operations have evolved dramatically since 1939, the focus remains on helping workers and businesses succeed in what can sometimes be challenging times.